DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 700 HE 026 355

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TITLE The Student Mentoring Program, 1989-1992. Retrospective Report.
INSTITUTION Oregon Community Foundation, Portland.
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 9p.; For a related document, see HE 026 354-356.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Colleges; *College School Cooperation; College Students; Grade 8; Higher Education; High Risk Students; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; Mentors; Middle Schools; Private Colleges; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; Public Schools; *Student Development; Universities; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS Lewis and Clark College OR; Middle School Students; Reed College OR; University of Portland OR; Warner Pacific College OR

ABSTRACT

The retrospective report summarizes results and recommendations resulting from the Oregon Community Foundation's Student Mentoring Program (SMP), which brought together college students from four private universities and a number of eighth grade students from four middle schools in mentoring relationships. The students were originally defined as "at risk," but that term was dropped as objectionable and too inexact, and the program was redefined as one for children who had the potential to go onto college and could benefit by the help provided by the mentors. The SMP was deemed successful in running the mentoring program and made advances in effective recruitment, selection, and pairing. Cost effectiveness was facilitated when colleges ran the programs on their own without central coordination; central coordination was also made difficult as the programs progressed. Costs of supporting a coordinator ultimately became too high for the four colleges participating in the program, and those who could not afford some staff time and a student coordinator ultimately had to discontinue the program. Stronger oversight from a funding source or administrator was seen as crucial to program direction. Funding was a problem in gaining some colleges' support for the program; however, two of the four colleges have shown measurable and positive results from the SMP and have chosen to continue the program. (GLR)

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RETROSPECTIVE REPORT
THE STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM
1989-1992

Lewis and Clark College
Reed College
University of Portland
Warner Pacific College

HE 026 355

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Prepared by Cate Huisman, Program Coordinator, August 1992

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Student Mentoring Program (SMP) created and supported approximately 180 pairings of college student mentors with eighth-grade mentees during a three-year period. The program was well-received by the four colleges and four middle schools in which it ran, and teachers and supervisors agreed with the majority of the participants--both mentees and mentors--that it was a valuable experience. Eighth-graders who had particularly strong relationships with their mentors showed modest gains in both grade-point averages and scores on a standardized test of self-concept.

The SMP was unique in that it was run by a consortium of colleges with one common coordinator, and was thus able both to demonstrate the advantages and drawbacks of such a model and, because the colleges did not all run the program the same way, to experiment with several program models at once. The ways in which academic credit was offered (or not offered) varied from college to college, the college person primarily responsible for the program on each campus came from a different department or office in each case, and the spiritual or social context of the program also varied among the campuses.

The project was coordinated by a half-time coordinator. College staff and middle-school staff created and monitored the pairings. The yearly cash budget averaged $45,000, and another $38,000 was contributed in in-kind contributions.

The SMP was constructive and helpful for many of the participants, but as an intervention of only eight or nine months it could not improve the lot of a borderline youngster over the long term. Such a program can be most useful if it is fit into a larger continuum of programs to keep young people supported and encouraged through high school and into college. The SMP attempted but was unable to raise money to initiate such a program itself. However, two of the colleges in the consortium will be able to continue running the program individually, and one will be able to expand the program to include high school students.

While colleges should have some interest in supporting programs that prepare young people to enter college, it is not likely that they will have the resources to run the kind of long-term interventions that are most likely to succeed. It is therefore imperative that colleges ally themselves with the public or corporate sectors to provide what they can on a continuum of services that will bring young people to their doors.

The attached report summarizes the results of the program and the recommendations of the coordinator and staff. A more detailed program report is available for those who might want to start such a program themselves. A third report provides details about how the program was evaluated.

BEGINNINGS

The Student Mentoring Program was initiated when a donor approached the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) voicing a desire to do something about school dropouts. The foundation approached Reed College, whose president convened a meeting of individuals from each of the four private colleges in Portland to address the issue.

Each college agreed to contribute part of the time (roughly 0.1 FTE) of one staff member to running a mentoring program. OCF contributed program expenses, extended-day pay for the middle-school staff, and the coordinator's salary and benefits; Reed College volunteered office space.

Initially the coordinator did almost all the program-planning; eventually the college staff and student coordinators took over these duties, and the coordinator became more involved in fund-raising and evaluation. Middle-school contacts identified students appropriate for the program and collected the necessary paperwork from them, then worked with the college contacts to pair them with mentors and monitor the pairs. They informed mentors when appropriate of issues the mentees were facing at school and at home and advised the mentors on how best to work with the mentees.

The program was governed by an executive committee that included all of the college contacts, one middle-school contact (different each year), a liaison to the Portland Public Schools, and the coordinator. This committee approved the budgets, grant proposals, training plans, and all-college activities planned by the coordinator.

PARTICIPANTS

The original definition of the students the program would serve was fairly vague and led to the inclusion of some mentees who seemed to need little help and others who needed more help than the program could provide. At the end of the first year, therefore, the four middle-school contacts met with the executive committee to define specifically who the program could best serve. They also agreed to ask seventh-grade teachers to identify potential mentees at the end of their seventh-grade year (for participation the following fall); eighth-grade teachers had had difficulty identifying appropriate mentees because they were just getting to know their students at the time they had to select them. In addition, the term "at-risk" was dropped from the program, and it was redefined as one for children who had the potential to go on to college.

The SMP grew from 38 mentor/student pairs in 1989-1990 to 85 pairs in 1990-1991, and was purposefully held to 65 pairs in 1991-1992. (The middle schools always wanted more mentors, but staff had had difficulty monitoring all the pairs in the program the second year.) Distribution of mentors among the four colleges remained fairly consistent over the three years, with the two smaller colleges--Reed and Warner Pacific--providing 7 to 15 mentors each year, and the larger two having 15 to 25. Mentors were overwhelmingly white and female, while mentees came from a variety of ethnic groups and referrals included at least as many boys as girls. Efforts to recruit more male and minority mentors were of minimal success; the colleges had small minority populations from which to draw. Mentors were originally recruited through student-life and volunteer-services staff, but after the first year, the majority of applicants had heard about the program from friends.

Mentors were asked to commit one school year to the program, and application forms were designed to help prospective mentors assess whether they could make such a commitment. Some colleges interviewed all applicants; at others the selection process was less formal, particularly where the applicant was known to the program through a staff person or previous mentor. Where interviews were performed, they were helpful in providing applicants with a clear idea of what was expected of them, and in some cases helped to identify more committed mentors. Mentors were occasionally disappointed to find that their mentees were not more desperately at-risk and grateful for the appearance of a good Samaritan; these problems decreased significantly in the second year and after, when experienced mentors were available to talk to recruits.

The program put only one limit on who could be paired with whom: mentors had to be paired with mentees of the same sex. Seventh-grade referring teachers were asked to provide an idea of what mentees

needed, and mentors were asked to provide some detail about what they were looking for in a mentee. It was a good idea to have some group activities for mentors and mentees before the pairings were made; then the middle-school and college contacts met to pair students whom they knew a little better.

The program found it beneficial to break two of its original rules--that no pairing should be broken for any reason, and that no mentors could enter the program after the first of the year. Some pairings just didn't work, and both mentees and mentors needed an option to withdraw with honor in these cases. The program maintained the commitment to the mentee by then searching for a new mentor (even though s/he would have missed training and orientation), and in most cases to the mentor also, by asking the middle school to locate another mentee.

TRAINING

A comprehensive training session was offered at the beginning of each academic year. Setting a date and an agenda were always challenging; the four colleges convened classes at different starting points in the fall, and the difference among them was as much as six weeks. Where mentors and mentees met before the training was held, mentor meetings on individual campuses were used to prepare mentors for the initial meetings with mentees.

The time devoted to training for all the mentors together shrunk in each successive year of the program. Institutional commitment to the training varied: some college staff insisted that mentors attend it; others did not. Even when staff insisted, mentors did not necessarily come. The program was in a poor position to insist that an individual could not be a mentor if s/he did not attend the training, because many mentors were already forming a relationship with a mentee when the training occurred. Mentors who were involved in the program as a practicum for course credit could be relied upon to attend.

Support meetings were held every two to three weeks during the school year. Mentors benefited most from discussions with other mentors and with middle-school contacts, and also used this time to plan group activities. Attendance at support meetings varied; some mentors felt they were useful and came always or often; some came when they didn't have papers due or other academic concerns; some came rarely if ever, either because their mentoring was going well and they didn't feel the need for the support, or because it was going poorly and they were embarrassed to admit that they hadn't seen their mentees in several weeks. This last group, of course, was the most frustrating--the program had no other way to provide them the support they needed to repair the relationship. Again, mentors involved in the program as a practicum for course credit were the best attenders and the most committed to making the relationships work.

In addition to the training and support meetings, mentors were encouraged during the first few weeks of the program to meet with the middle-school contact individually and/or to meet with the mentee's home-room teacher to find out more about why s/he had been referred to the program.

ACTIVITIES

Each fall the program and the mentors were introduced to parents at a meeting held at each middle school. These were well attended and successful for a variety of purposes: Mentors had an opportunity early in the year to meet their mentees' parents and discuss the hopes and plans they had for their children; parents appreciated the opportunity to meet their children's mentors and to receive an overview of the program; the coordinator could ask parents to fill out permission forms and questionnaires; the PPS liaison could inform parents of their rights and responsibilities with respect to the program, and principals were always happy to see so many parents in school!

Virtually all mentors felt that their best interactions with mentees occurred in unstructured settings such as informal sports and recreation activities. Most mentors and mentees visited each other's schools often. Lewis and Clark mentors each spent an entire school day at Ockley Green School, going to classes with their mentees. Pairs and groups of pairs also went on field trips together all over the city and to the beach, the mountains, and each other's homes.

Attempts to provide structured activities to learn about high-school and college options were never fully successful, and middle-school contacts emphasized that simply maintaining a friendly relationship was of primary importance. Attempts to provide activities for mentor/mentee pairs from all four colleges/schools were also generally unsuccessful--the challenges posed by the different college calendars, ideologies, and locations were simply too great to overcome.

PROGRAMS ON EACH CAMPUS

Lewis and Clark College. Lewis and Clark was the only college to offer mentors academic credit for mentoring and participating in mentor meetings. (The other colleges each had a few courses for which mentoring could be used as a practicum activity in conjunction with other classroom work.) Mentor meetings took the form of weekly classes, which were most successful when they were taught by the staff contact in conjunction with members of the education faculty, and when they focussed specifically on the issues the mentors were facing day-to-day, rather than on the larger social context.

The staff contact at Lewis and Clark was the Coordinator of Student Support Services. She was in a good position to understand the challenges of being a mentor, but because she was not a member of the faculty, she had some difficulties initially in getting mentoring established as a course for credit. Her job kept her extremely busy, and the support of her administrative assistant in dealing with the logistics of the program and the volunteer assistance of the chapel coordinator were essential in keeping the program going.

Transportation was a continuing challenge for Lewis and Clark mentors, whose campus was almost half an hour's drive from Ockley Green School. Mentors had to commit to meeting mentees at specific days and times, much more so than at the other colleges, and this specificity, along with academic credit, may have helped mentors maintain their commitments to the program.

Lewis and Clark will continue its program with Ockley Green in the fall of 1992, and its mentoring course--provisional in 1991-1992--is now fully accepted as a course in the department of education. A grant from the Portland Educational Network will cover some transportation and activity expenses and will enable the program to continue to pay extended-day pay to its middle-school contact. In addition, the grant will enable Lewis and Clark to pair with Pacific University to expand its program into Jefferson High School, providing program activities and opportunities for former mentees as they move through high school.

Warner Pacific College. Each year Warner had two or three absolute standout mentors who saw their mentees weekly, participated in numerous activities with them, got to know their families, and continued to see them after the academic year ended. However, many mentors experienced continuing difficulty in maintaining commitment to the program through the end of each academic year. Mentors had trouble establishing effective relationships with their mentees and missed mentor meetings--they seemed to fear being judged wanting at these meetings. Ultimately the most committed mentors conducted group activities for all the mentees.

Mentee commitment was also a problem in the first year, when mentoring activities were offered during the school day, and mentees joined the program just to get out of class. After the first year, all activities were offered after school hours.

Warner's initial staff contact--who was also the college's vice president--did not have as much time to oversee the program as it needed. When the campus pastor was recruited to take over the program, he had more time but didn't have the benefit of the experience that the other staff contacts had.

Staff shortfalls will prevent Warner from continuing the SMP in 1992-1993. The former campus pastor would like to continue providing mentors to Whitaker School if he gets a position in a church or parish where he is able to recruit mentors.

University of Portland. The SMP at the University of Portland (UP) is part of a large service program there. By the third year, UP preferred to run the SMP pretty much on its own, independent of the consortium except for funding. It was run much like UP's 12 other community service programs, with a paid student coordinator supported by one of two full-time staff in the Office of Volunteer Services.

One student coordinator who served part of the second year was a graduate student oriented toward therapy and intervention; this "professional" approach intimidated and alienated the majority of mentors. By the third year, however,the role was better defined and activities for the SMP were all planned and carried out by an efficient and effective student. UP's Office of Volunteer Services provided a party at Christmas, a banquet in the spring, thank-you notes, and official appreciation for all the university's volunteers.

Service is clearly a priority for UP. It will continue running the SMP during 1992-1993 much as it has in the past.

Reed College. Reed had relatively small but dedicated groups of mentors throughout the three years of the program. Reed students tend to be quite dedicated to their academic work, and they had difficulty finding time for group activities. They seemed, however, to be fairly successful at conducting their relationships through individual meetings with their mentees. After the first meeting each year at Lane School, Reed mentors usually met their mentees at their homes, which were nearby, or on the campus.

In the first year, the Reed mentors were most successful of all the mentors groups at attending mentor meetings and supporting one another; the small size of their group that year (seven mentors) simplified scheduling. In subsequent years, however, attendance at mentor meetings was spotty, with some attending regularly, some occasionally, and some not at all. Attendance at meetings did not seem to correlate with success as a mentor.

The staff contact at Reed was the director of career advising. Without the support of the central coordinator, neither she nor Reed's half-time community services coordinator could run the program in 1992-1993.

EVALUATION

Short-term social programs such as the SMP are notoriously hard to evaluate for several reasons. Data are difficult to collect, reliable measures are hard to find, and some of the effects of such a program may not be evident for several years.

Most of the evaluation was carried out by the coordinator, with advice from one psychology professor in the third year. Beyond this, faculty assistance in designing and carrying out the evaluation was not forthcoming. Two graduate students were recruited during the second year to assist, but their performance was unsatisfactory.

To collect as much information as possible and to increase the likelihood that effects on participants would be detected, the evaluation used several repeated measures, including interviews with and questionnaires for parents and staff, standardized tests, and mentees' grades and attendance records. Some sets of data were not complete enough to provide useful results. Cooperation from the Portland Public Schools Office of Research and Evaluation was excellent, however; hence data sets of mentees' grades and attendance records were close to complete.

RESULTS

Grade-Point Averages (GPAs): Average GPAs for all mentees improved at two of the schools (Portsmouth and Ockley Green) in years 1 and 2 of the program. In year 3, average GPAs improved significantly only for the "strong group" (the five mentees at each school who had the strongest relationships with their mentors). At all schools, the lower the GPA the student started with, the greater his or her improvement during the year: mentees who had seventh-grade cumulative GPAs of 2.0 or less

improved their grades by an average of almost half a grade point. Mentees also showed a lower than average drop in GPA during the transition from middle school to high school.

Mentee Interviews: Responses were summarized as follows by an independent evaluator: "The interviews make it clear that many mentees appreciate having: a friend, a counselor, a tutor, and some exposure to college life. Most of the mentors seem to have achieved at least one of these functions successfully, and many achieved several. "

Tennessee Self-Concept Scale: No significant change was registered for the group of all mentees, or for any ethnic or gender subgroup. However, the "strong" group showed significant positive change on two scales. These results suggest that the strength of the relationship is important, and tends to refute the theory that just being selected for the program contributes to measurable change.

Teacher and parent questionnaires: Few data were collected; those that were collected showed slight positive trends in parents' and teachers' observations of mentees' behavior. Both groups indicated that statements about how much the SMP would benefit the student were slightly less true at year-end than at the beginning of the year: The program may not have done a good job of giving parents and teachers a realistic idea of what it could provide.

Interviews and Structured Statements: These indicated that the program was valuable for students who would not otherwise be noticed and/or who would not otherwise have had a realistic expectation of what it takes to go on to college. The program was quite cost-effective relative to other mentoring programs in the Portland Public Schools.

Mentor Questionnaires: Best interactions with mentees were all reported to have occurred in unstructured activities, with the exception of the challenge course. Eighty-eight percent of mentors visited their mentees' homes at least twice; nearly half visited at least seven times. Fifty percent of mentees visited their mentor's campus at least three times. Mentors' statements about what they learned from the program fell into four general categories: about themselves, about the social circumstances in which their mentees grew up, about how to see things from other peoples' points of view, and about how to maintain a relationship under sometimes difficult circumstances. Mentors thought mentees learned more about the world outside their own neighborhoods and developed some self-confidence and awareness of their college potential.

ENDINGS

In the third year of the program, the coordinator, with the advice of the executive committee, began considering expanding the program so that it could provide activities for mentees through high school. The program applied for initial funding through the National and Community Service Act, and planned to apply for long-term funding through one of the programs then being established through the Higher Education Act .

All four colleges had difficulty getting presidential support for the expanded program and matching funds for the federal grant. Ultimately the University of Portland decided that being in the consortium was not cost-effective and asked to be removed from the grant proposal. Warner Pacific withdrew when budget cuts left it with too few staff to provide for the program. The coordinator looked into the possibility of raising the necessary matching cash through independent sources, but the colleges remaining in the consortium could not reach agreement on any they would allow her to approach.

SUMMARY

The SMP dealt successfully with several of the day-to-day difficulties of running a mentoring program, making great strides in the effective recruitment, selection, and pairing of mentors and mentees, and in providing mentors with both initial and year-long support. It confirmed the experience of other such programs that mentors will most likely attend training and support meetings regularly, and maintain their commitment to their mentees and the program, if they receive academic credit for their efforts.

The SMP built an excellent foundation from which to expand into a long-term college-preparation program. It was less successful than originally envisioned at getting mentees involved in something that would hold their interests after their mentors were gone.

Central coordination was essential in getting the SMP designed, funded, and started, but as the programs diverged at the different colleges, it appeared to be more cost-effective for individual colleges to run the programs on their own with part-time staff commitment and a good, paid student coordinator. The variety of academic schedules--both among individual mentors and among the four colleges' academic calendars, the physical distances between the colleges and schools, and the lack of desire for a single set of activities made central coordination a questionable idea as the programs matured. Ultimately the cost of supporting a coordinator became too high for the four colleges in the consortium, and when the role was eliminated, the colleges that could not afford some staff time and a student coordinator had to discontinue the program.

Stronger oversight from a funding sources or a college administrator may have helped set the direction of the program. The coordinator was only that--she could not insist that mentors attend training, colleges provide academic credit, faculty become involved in the evaluation, or development offices look for long-term funding. Although she was the only person whose sole responsibility was the welfare of the program, she did not have the power to do everything that might have contributed to its success.

Like its beginnings, the SMP's end is also a function of its times: as funding has tightened, colleges have had to recognize that they cannot be all things to all people and must carefully choose the programs they support and the priorities they represent. It is encouraging that the two colleges whose partner middle schools showed the greatest measurable results have chosen to continue the program, and exciting that the five-year program the consortium once envisioned will be put in place by at least one of the college/school pairs.